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I.—CONGREVE AS A ROMANTICIST

William Congreve is undeniably the most polished of our dramatic writers and probably the most witty. Of his four comedies, *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, *Love for Love*, and *The Way of the World*, the first is one of the most scurrilous plays in English, and the last one of the most exquisite. If this were all that is to be said of him, one might be content to leave him to the scholars and the connoisseurs who at present seem to be his only earnest readers. But there is another and a greater claim to be made for Congreve. There is the claim not merely that he should be regarded as a classic—an empty and neglectful honor—but also that he should have that loving perusal by a younger generation which is the rightful prerogative of a classic. A reputation for indecency, a suspicion that he is one of those “to be read for style only,” most of all, ignorance or a misunderstanding of the real quality of his plays, have made his immortality an immortality on shelves, bookcases, and desks, dusty altars for his brilliance. This is of little moment for Congreve, who professed to despise literary fame in his lifetime, and

would ask for no popularity now, but it is of some importance for readers of our generation who have revived the old interest in published plays, and should not be frightened or discouraged from the best.

That the comedies of Congreve are the best in prose that our language offers few critics will deny, even if in the same breath they make the charge of grossness in purpose which was responsible for much of Congreve's bad repute in the nineteenth century. In this essay I hope to prove the untruth of this charge, without performing the impossible task of acquitting the plays of grossness in word and in act. That the best of these comedies contain a refinement, an elixir of life not found elsewhere in such perfection in English, and that it is this which makes them immortal and therefore worthy of our better acquaintance, is perhaps a more interesting and valuable proposition. It is with this last, which is not so much an attempted defence, as an attempted explanation of Congreve, that I am chiefly concerned.

Charles Lamb has been Congreve's best friend among the critics. "I do not know how it is with others," he wrote, "but I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's comedies. I am the gayer at least for it: and I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves, almost as much as fairy-land. . . . The Fainalls and the Mirabells, the Dorimants and the Lady Touchwoods, in their own sphere, do not offend my moral sense; in fact they do not appeal to it at all. They seem engaged in their proper element. They break through no laws or conscientious restraints. They know of none. They have got out of Christendom into the land—what shall I call it—of cuckoldry—the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is

duty, and the manners perfect freedom. It is altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is."

This, I suppose, is what we should call now-a-days impressionistic criticism. It describes the effect of these comedies upon the sensitive, tolerant spirit of a humorist. It must arouse both assent and dissent in the minds of those of us who have felt, in reading, the incomparable charm, and also the indubitable hardness of those gay Congrevian folk who move through plots which cynicism underlies, and trickery carries forward. Some fortunate ones may readily assent, and be satisfied with the liberal critic's assertion that they do right to leave the moral sense at home when their imagination goes to these plays. Upon their sensory nerves *The Way of the World*, for example, makes a pleasant effect which Lamb's criticism adequately describes. The indecency, the hardness, the cynicism do not trouble them; that the actors had prototypes whose wickedness was not Utopian does not mar their enjoyment; they recognize, without analysis, that this is only Utopia after all, and are not disturbed. Frankly, there is probably in the essay which follows nothing for such readers. They have already gotten as much as they have a right to expect from their Congreve.

But there is another class, of whom I admit myself one, which is more troubled by historical perspective and moral responsibility, less blest with the ability to take art at its face value. We remember that Macaulay professed to contradict flatly Lamb's pleasing defense by proving, as was but too easy, that the Fainalls and the Mirabells had counterparts in the life of the period, whose deeds were unpleasantly real; that the court of James II. and William III. was no fairy-land, and that the comedies were studied from this court. We are obstinately curious to know

why these plays, in spite of this apparent reality of their scenes, can make the impression of a world where moral laws are broken with relative impunity. Perhaps we wish to justify our liking for plays that many call wicked, or thrash out for once (though this is presumptuous) the old question of art *versus* morality. In any case there is only one course open: we must approach Congreve as if he were Ibsen, or Brieux, or Shaw. On the one hand is the society he lived in; on the other, the plays he made from it. What is the true relation between them? Only when that question has been answered can we call him moral, unmoral, or immoral, or, what is more important, define his art.

Are they realism, these plays, where cynical lovers and careless coquettes do the things that ought not to be done, and mention the unmentionable: where Mirabell plots with an old mistress to get a new one, or where two young bachelors and one old, heap for five acts scorn and disgrace upon matrimony? Unfortunately it is scarcely necessary to prove that the Valentines, the Mellefonts, the Belindas who move through Congreve's plays had prototypes, even for their worst misdemeanors, in the Restoration and the Orange ages in London. The satire of Swift, the mockery of Pope, the evidence of Addison, all contemporaries of Congreve, would establish it; but we have proof which needs no support in *The Memoirs of Grammont* and in the historical records of the time. It is certain that Congreve's scenes have a very direct reference to the world which his audiences knew. And his assertion that the dialogue of *The Way of the World* had profited by the conversation of Ralph, Earl of Montague and the gay society in retirement with him from the town, might have been altered, with a possible gain in sincerity, to an acknowl-

edgment of indebtedness to him and to his class for the manners presented upon the stage.

But the certainty that these plays were based directly upon the gay life of the period in no sense proves that they are realism. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that these Bellmours who think that loose-living is the chief duty of man, these Valentines whose talk is wine and honey, while their acts, as Voltaire said, are the acts of "frippons," these charming Angelicas and Millamants who toy with indecency and are chaste only from fastidiousness—it is difficult to believe that they represent a literal transcript, either in their charm or in their wickedness, of the courtly society of the times. Credulity strains at accepting as literally true a world where morality is scarcely believed in, where men are esteemed only for their skill in gallantry, and the folly of fools is measured by their deficiencies in the arts of libertinism. And in spite of the proved laxity of the times perhaps credulity is right. Jeremy Collier, who, to be sure, is a prejudiced witness, denied that the stage presented the "quality" with fairness. Addison, a much better one, is equally impressed, as one can see in *Spectator* 446, with the difference between life in the comedies, and the life which he knew and had known. It would seem, indeed, that a society actually governed by the principles, the morals, the habits of the Restoration comedy would be as impossible as a community made up exclusively of gamblers, murderers, and pickpockets.

But even if there had been a society as light-principled as this of the plays, even though there were individuals as indifferent to morality, nevertheless this drama is certainly not an utterly realistic presentation. A plain statement of the *facts* about Mirabell as they might be deduced and summarized from Congreve's play would be utterly different in its effect upon the reader from the account of

Mirabell the fastidious libertine as Congreve writes it. In the first, he would appear as a clever gentleman whose charming manners would not blind us to the truth,—that he passed without scruple from one amour to another, and gave up vice only because he had found something more fascinating. In the second, he is—well, Mirabell. Or, to draw our illustrations from a wider range, Rochester and Buckingham: how different is the account of their affairs given by the matter-of-fact Pepys, who calls Rochester “an idle rogue,” from that tale of their gallant exploits which ornaments *The Memoirs of Grammont*, a book which shares the atmosphere of the comedies. How different is Pepys’s bald statement of a rascal’s career from the Dorimant of Etherege’s *Sir Fopling Flutter*, and those other gay character sketches of the comedy which are usually supposed to be based upon these notable rakes of the court of Charles II.! How different is this world as Evelyn saw it in his diary from its gay illusion for the dramatist! No, there is much reality; but of true realism, the attempt to see things as they are, there is little in these plays.

But if not realism, what? Is it clever literary heightening which has transformed the world which lay about the dramatist into a Utopia of gallantry? That some part of this result is due to such a heightening is undeniable. Congreve’s exquisite style in itself is sufficient to make ugly deeds into “sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.” It gives an indescribable charm to a stage world that lacks all moral excellence:

*Millamant (repeating).* “Like Phoebus sung the no less amorous boy.”

*Mirabell (who enters).* “Like Daphne she, as lovely and as coy.” Do you lock yourself up from me, to make my search more curious? Or is this pretty artifice contriv’d, to signify that here the chase must end, and my pursuit be crown’d; for you can fly no farther?

*Millamant.* Vanity! No—— I'll fly and be follow'd to the last moment; tho' I am upon the very verge of matrimony, I expect you shou'd solicit me as much as if I were wavering at the gate of a monastery, with one foot over the threshold. I'll be solicited to the very last, nay, and afterwards.

But our question is not so answered. Literary heightening is only a means after all. It is only the means by which the writer expresses his imaginative conception of life. We must look deeper,—to his conception of the life about him, for the cause of Congreve's transformation of a very real society into Utopia.

The truth is that Congreve did not present the life of his contemporaries with absolute realism because, like so many others before and since, he *did not see it realistically*. He presented not life as it was, but rather the fashionable world's, and his own, conception of the life they were leading. What this was can well be seen in the memoirs of one of them, the Count of Grammont. These memoirs, written in the old age of the Count, by his brother-in-law, the talented Anthony Hamilton (who himself had lived at the English court), depict, it is true, the court of Charles II., not that of William and Mary. But as it is clear that the drama of the Orange period is different only in polish from that of the first two or three decades after the Restoration, so it is agreed that the fashionable life of the 'nineties of the century differed only in degree from that of the 'sixties and 'seventies. In these charming if licentious memoirs personages of the highest nobility, men of importance to the State, women whose sovereignty was renowned, and youths who were preparing for the great responsibilities of the nation, all act, as the whirl of pleasure carries them up and down, like desperadoes, hoydens, clowns, spoiled children, or beasts. The beautiful

Jennings, "prettiest and most extraordinary creature in England," and maid of honor to the Duchess of York, disguises herself as an orange girl, and goes to the play-house. Sydney, "more handsome than the beautiful Adonis," was busy adjusting his curls, but the other fine gentlemen soon taught her what was expected of the character she had assumed. The rake of rakes, Lord Rochester, being exiled from court, changed his name and made himself familiar with the burgesses, railing against the profligacy of the court ladies and such rakes as himself; then further disguised himself as a German doctor-astrologer that he might do mischief to the sex from a new point of vantage. Lady Chesterfield, having deceived both husband and lover, tempts the latter to follow her forced exile from London, then leaves him to freeze till daybreak in the mud of a garden. The court laughed at the lover, and bitterly condemned the jealousy of the husband! The men are known by the mistresses they are besieging; the women by their breaches of decorum as much as by their beauty and address. "The court," says Hamilton,<sup>1</sup> "was an entire scene of gallantry and amusements, with all the politeness and magnificence, which the inclinations of a prince, naturally addicted to tenderness and pleasure, could suggest; the beauties were desirous of charming, and the men endeavored to please; all studied to set themselves off to the best advantage; some distinguished themselves by dancing; others by show and magnificence; some by their wit, many by their amours, but few by their constancy."

It was not as an "entire scene of gallantry and amusements" that the Puritans characterized this court. They called it a brothel; and modern historians are not much more complimentary. But to Hamilton it was

<sup>1</sup> Chapter VIII.

not ugly, it was not vicious, this court where the king kept a harem, and illicit love was the theme by day and by night. To him it was no loose riot of the passions, however it may have appeared to those who looked on from without the circle. He sees not lasciviousness in all these wild revellings, but gallantry; not debauchery, but the free pleasures of men of the world; not idle quarrelsomeness, but the keenness of honor. He idealizes the profligacy of this court; he idealizes the acts of its most graceful and its vilest members, so that in his pages they do remain "ingenious and entertaining." And we do not have to be Puritans in order to see that the basis of his *Memoirs* was in no sense realism, that is, an attempt to see things as they were in the court.

But the idealization was not altogether his, although we must ascribe some of its success to a mind which, as Horace Walpole said, was "superior to the indelicacy of the court," and some to the literary powers of the writer. It was also in some measure the idealization of the court itself, of the Chevalier de Grammont as he thought of his career, of Miss Jennings, of Charles in the gaiety of White-hall. It was the fashionable view of the fashionable vices of the age. It was a pose necessary to human nature in such circumstances, and especially necessary to a society gross in its manners but, by the example of France, and the standards of its generation, committed to an assumption of elegance even in its immoralities.

And it was the same gay Stuart world, a score of years later but still idealizing rakishness, that Congreve studied. His society closely resembled that of Charles's Court, its conception of gallant life was the same. Like Hamilton, he shared its conception, its tendency to idealize rakishness, and, as with Hamilton, this prevented his work from being realism. Mirabell is wittier than the rakes

of Charles's circle, Millamant is more exquisite, more fastidious than Miss Stewart and Miss Jennings as they appear in *Grammont*, but they would have been at home in the *Memoirs*. And if Congreve's literary heightening is far greater and far more successful than Hamilton's, so much the greater is his divergence, in spite of the vividness of his portraiture, from plain, uncolored realism.

Have we told the truth of Congreve when we say that he was the artist who best idealized libertinism, and thus satisfied the desires of his class in his age? Not the whole truth. It is certain that Hamilton in some measure, and Congreve to a far greater degree, did, in the true sense of the word, idealize the life of the libertine, that is, they brought out the inner meaning of that life, and with varying success distilled what it possessed of grace and of charm. But it is even more apparent that they were unfortunate enough to do more than this, that they over-emphasized (as did, to a greater degree, Congreve's predecessors among the dramatists of Charles's reign, and his contemporaries, Farquhar and Vanbrugh) the gross, the lascivious, and the cynical in this libertinism. This is not idealization. The term does not cover these facts. It is too narrow to describe the angle from which these writers viewed their world. It cannot denominate the impulse which not only made them idealize its libertine desires but also caused them to detail affectionately, and with complete absence of moral reprobation, its ugly libertine deeds. Grant the idealization and there is still a cause of causes to be sought and named before you can apprehend the inner spirit of these elusive comedies.

Fiction, the gay and almost worthless fiction of the Restoration period, where the literature of rakishness attains its greatest exaggeration, offers unexpected aid in comprehending the far more perfect work of the dramatists.

M. Victor Cherbuliez, in a recent article in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, has discussed in a very interesting fashion the vogue of the roué in French literature of the early days of Louis XIV., choosing the *Gil Blas* of Le Sage as his prime example. Monsieur, the duke of Orleans, was the leader of the fashion as it showed itself in real life; Le Sage but one of many contemporary authors who put it into fiction. It is scarcely needful to add that novels which reflected this spirit of rakishness were widely read in England as well as in France. A swarm of stories of intrigue in gallant life, translated or imitated from the French, poured into English presses from the beginning of this period onward. Sometimes they were called "romances," though much shorter, less unreal, and more licentious than the heroic romance of Scudéry; sometimes "novels," which meant then news of amorous adventure, real or feigned, among people of quality. The publishers' catalogues for these years prove that English readers were clamoring for such stories, and the subscription after many of them, "by a person of quality," as well as their courtly atmosphere, shows, at least, the class for which they were composed.

This fiction breathes forth the very spirit of what Hamilton might have called gallantry. It contains in exaggerated form the motives which animated the court that condemned Lord Chesterton for punishing the infidelity of his lady, and inspired Grammont to seek amorous adventure instead of confining himself, as his practical friend, Saint-Evremond advised, to the more profitable occupation of play. And it very often includes, as the frequent sub-title, *Secret History*, proves, a romantic version of the actual deeds of the smart set of England or of France. The authors are concerned with the pursuit of pleasure as practised by a debased chivalry. The chase of woman

becomes a gallant war, where men win by renown of their victories, and women by their defeats. Elegance is a prime requisite; virtue is unfashionable. Worth is measured in terms of wit; and spiritual eminence, when it appears, by the fastidiousness which determines the pleasure to be sought. With less truth to the life about them, with less art, and with less success, these novelists work in the field which was tilled in a more masterly fashion by the comic dramatists of the age.

It was in this field of gallant narrative that Aphra Behn, the one English writer of powerful fiction in the age, won a distinction which has been at least as durable as her reputation as a dramatist. It was in this field that the young Congreve, then only a boy, made his first adventure into literature with *Incognita: or Love and Duty Reconcil'd*, a little novel which reflects with some charm but no originality the spirit of the period. And from the later stories of Mrs. Manley and Mrs. Haywood scores of less worthy and much more licentious examples could be chosen to show how thorough was the attempt to render interesting, attractive, and romantic, a life which was sometimes vicious, often unprincipled, and always unrestrained.

The young Congreve asserts in the preface to his *Incognita* that the so-called "novel" is of a more familiar nature than the heroic romance; that it comes nearer to us with its intrigues, its accidents, and events which are neither unreal nor unprecedented. This is true, but these novels are in no sense realism. There is, to an even greater extent than in the comedies, a heightening of all which emphasizes the delights of amorous pleasure-seeking, of all which throws a glamour over rakishness. The reckless gallants of Scarron's *Innocent Adultery* (that book which Lucy in *The Rivals* thrust into *The Whole*

*Duty of Man*), the dashing adventuresses of Mrs. Haywood, are pictures of the gay libertine with all that the libertine would dislike left out, all that he would like to be or to do heightened, exaggerated, as adequately as the rather moderate powers of the authors would permit. It is the language of romance, of the heroic romance of Scudéry, and of the heroic tragedy, which these creatures speak when they rise towards the climax of their stories. And romance of a different order has colored the actions which are given them, the sentiments they express, and the view of life which their creators must be supposed to have possessed. The libertine of these novels is as romantic as his language. The conception of life held by the novelist is romantic. And the comedy of this period, which, in spite of its notable differences in style and in restraint, handles libertinism in this very fashion, has also a basis of romance.

Blinded by the hot romance of Byron, Keats, and Tennyson, of Shakespeare and of Marlowe, critics have sometimes been too narrow in their limitations of the romantic view of life. Romance for a romantic period is the light that never was on land or sea; but in more prosaic times it may also be the light that never was in ball-room or coffee-house. Wax candles and flambeaux may supply it as truly if not so nobly as moonlight, or the rays of setting suns. Rakes and women no better than they should be may seek it as keenly, if not so heroically, as fiery-souled Childe Harolds, or pure-hearted Juliets. The roué has his especial romance and by such romance much of the noble and the ignoble in the literature of this period was colored. In the empty grandiloquence and strained passions of the tragedies of Dryden, Otway, and Lee, in the heroic absurdity of the fiction of a Scudéry or a Boyle, is to be found the remains of the powerful

romance of an earlier age. As a recent historian of our drama has observed, it was in such work that the Restoration gratified what was left of the *old* romantic fervor. But the rakish novel which we have just been describing, and the rakish comedy, are not unromantic because they are so different from the heroic fiction and the heroic drama. They descend to deeds, thoughts, and desires which were more possible, more prosaic, and lower in tone. They are full of literal transcripts of grossness; real life is their model, at least with the comedies; they admit moods of the realist, such as the cynical and the satiric; yet there is romance in the angle from which the writer views his libertine world.

This is very obvious in the rakish novel, but unsatisfactory. The romance is seldom successful; indeed the best stories are those in which the least glamour and the most reality are given to the rake, as for example in *Gil Blas*. The verbiage of decadent heroics encumbers the pages of the specimens which England produced, and is mingled with a thoroughly hypocritical morality. Heroic romance joins with rakish romance to form a compound which is muddy even when it is not vile. Again, in Grammont's *Memoirs* the romance is less obvious, since it is confined to the point of view of the writer. It is just sufficient to prevent his charmingly real figures from being realism. It was in the comedies that the romantic attitude towards gallantry produced its greatest effects.

Much in these comedies is essentially unromantic. The playwrights were realists by bent, like the Dryden of the satires, like Swift, like Pope. They were inclined towards satire, towards criticism, towards an unsparing exhibition of life as they saw it. As every one knows, their representation of society is far more gross, their dialogue more indecent, their incidents more exceptionable

than was the case with Molière and the French school from whom they learned so much of their trade. Much too in this drama is essentially Jacobean. Many characters, many incidents, and many dialogues are as like to Ben Jonson as their authors could make them, and so are reminiscent of a past age rather than symptomatic of a new one. And even in their romance the Restoration playwrights saw no forest of Arden, no Athenian wood, or coast of Bohemia. Nevertheless, behind their cynical studies of would-be gallants, and their sympathetic portraits of free livers and free lovers, was the attempt to discover some Utopia of gallantry, as Lamb with his keen intuition named the world of their stage. They sought their *own* romance.

Too frequently, as one might expect from such an enterprise, the license which accompanied their view of life resulted in such grossness and sensuality that the names of these writers have been blackened for posterity. Congreve in his first play, *The Old Bachelor*, presents a cynical outlaw from sexual morality, and two young rakes who pursue libertinism in its most ardent forms. In the rollicking atmosphere of the play these characters are no longer, as in real life, mere evidences of barbarism or degeneracy. The young author partly succeeds in imposing upon us his conception of the libertinism he was depicting. Nevertheless, this attempt to make attractive the grosser attributes of the rake is clearly unfortunate. The ugly blackness of word or deed shows through the rose of the spot-light. The writer has applied literary heightening to life of a kind better left to the realist. His romantic view of "sporting-life" has led him to attempt a gilding of dirt. Wycherley, Etherege, Vanbrugh sin with him and far more deeply.

But on the other hand, if there is any virtue, or any charm in the life whose excesses we term libertinism, this romantic view was sure to bring it out. And in truth in all the plays which lift themselves above mere grossness some traces are to be found of the fastidiousness, the liberality, the grace which when attained were better attained by this libertine generation than by any other. Congreve was the least gross, the most skilful, and the finest of the dramatists. In his plays, gallantry is truly romantic. The weary worldlings whom he loved to depict disengage themselves from the imperfections of libertinism, and move away from their unlovely companions in the caste. Mellefont in *The Double Dealer*, Angelica in *Love for Love*, most of all Mirabell and Millamant in *The Way of the World*, are all true products of a rakish society. They could have bloomed nowhere else. Follow Mirabell through his play and you will see that he has denied himself nothing that furthers his pleasure. But his pleasure is now not avarice or debauchery, it is the exquisite Millamant. That charming personality is also libertine. She is virtuous to be sure, but out of contempt for her lovers and a nice fastidiousness. When her capricious mind is in a fine rage of distemper for the crudities of her drunken suitor, Wilful, it is the verse of Suckling which discharges her pent-up emotion, Suckling the poet of gallantry, who dwells upon lust! But though libertine, Millamant is not gross. Her mind is as exquisite as her body. She jests at the delights of pleasure-seeking until they become piquant. She enriches worldliness, and tempers sensuality by taste. It is Mirabell's power to refine upon the relations of sex, his desire to make love to the mind as well as to the body, which attracts her. And reciprocally, in loving her this roué lifts his ideal from the gross. All this is the vision of a romanticist; and it follows naturally

that, for all its verisimilitude, his work has sometimes the glamour, and the imaginative appeal of romance.

Thus, to return to our questions, it was this romanticizing of the libertinism of Stuart life which makes the finest of Congreve's plays to seem a Utopia of gallantry wherein man sins without serious injury to the moral sense of the reader. His best characters, though relatively true to life, act, as Lamb's phrase suggests, in a world idealized by romance, the world in which a libertine society wished to believe. Thus Lamb's phrase is a good phrase, and a true critical summary of the most distinctive quality of Restoration drama. It merely needs to be explained; and the explanation is that where gallantry was in question Congreve wrote not realism but romance. It is this which gives to the literature which he left a flavor of peculiar piquancy, to be found nowhere else in English but in the work of his contemporaries, and there obscured by the errors which accompanied so rash an attempt. And it is this which may give to his plays their most interesting claim upon greatness.

This interpretation of Congreve's work, and particularly of his attitude towards the society of which he wrote, is confirmed by, and may serve to explain, the strange contrast between his private life and the gay licentiousness of his plays. Aside from an almost respectable intrigue with the Bracegirdle, a fondness for good wine, and a weakness for high society, nothing is charged against him. In the one published group of his familiar letters, letters written to Joseph Keally of Ireland, a friend of his inner circle and of as close an intimacy as Congreve permitted to men, he appears, at the time of *The Way of the World* and shortly after, as a portly gentleman of retiring habits, more solicitous for his income than for gay pleasures, joking solemnly or lamenting over his dog, Sappho,

and far more likely to remind one of Gray or of Addison than of the witty, careless debauchees of his fancy. Even Mirabell, who in refinement and in fastidiousness is like Congreve, and has by some been supposed to represent him, is only less unlike than the others to this quiet, scholarly gentleman of private tastes, and most reputable habits. But grant the romantic point of view, the idealizing tendency, and this contrast which has puzzled his biographers is no longer so surprising. In actual experience we know that he partook only of the finer flavors of gallantry, such flavors as the charm of his society, and the delicacy of his relations with women might lead us to suppose that he would enjoy. But if in imagination he sympathized with libertine ideals, it is natural that in his writing he should make (often too readily) a romance of gallantry from the exploits of a rake. Goethe, though sound and sane himself, gave an impulse as well as a needed vigor to sentimentality in his *Sorrows of Werther*. And correspondingly this dramatist, though most respectable in his private affairs, applauded as well as beautified a wild libertinism in his comedies.

Again, this interpretation of Congreve explains perhaps, certainly is supported by, the strange position of the dramatist in a controversy which still echoes in English literature. It was in Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the English Stage* (1698) that the justifiable irritation against the licentiousness of the contemporary drama found its most impressive voice. In 1698 the playwrights of the reign of William III. were at their height. It was specifically against them that Collier, who was Jacobite in party, but Puritan in outlook, directed his attack; and if his complaint seems often to be against the English stage in general, as some critics have maintained, this was only because his advocacy of a moral purpose in stage

representation made him fall foul of great names in earlier periods. The Elizabethans suffer but little at his hands, even the foul-penned Wycherley, whose work was done, comes off but lightly, and the vials of his wrath are reserved, as was indeed fitting, for his active contemporaries, the writers then composing for the stage.

Collier's wrath was to be dreaded. His cause was holy, his prejudice vast, his style a chopping, smashing instrument with which he smote and hewed regardless of the arguments he left unprotected. Congreve and his contemporaries were charged with four misdemeanors: disrespect to the "quality"; disrespect to God's ministers; the countenancing of indecent or immoral behavior; and profanity.

The first charge we cannot take seriously, and Congreve did not fail to answer his part of it successfully in his *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations*, a little pamphlet which represents his contributions to what became a battle of the presses. Nor is the second accusation driven home with any palpable success. It was the last two items which troubled the dramatists. It was profanity which Collier cried out against most raggingly. It was indecency which remained as proved in the judgment of posterity.

Now the so-called profanities which Collier finds in Congreve's work are profanities by convention only; Shakespeare is guilty of such indiscretions as often as Congreve; a modern writer of comic opera much more often. But the indecencies of language which Collier charges upon him are not conventions, even when trivial; the licentiousness of action and of spirit which he points out are not to be denied or explained away. Yet Congreve's answer is only the child's "You're another!" The lewdness, so he says, is in Collier's mind; his adversary is

one of those writers characterized by Ben Jonson who "suck the poison of Books." And this weak defence is rendered more feeble by an irritation which spreads through the remainder of the *Amendments*. Was this keen analyst of character unable to see the inconsistency of his argument? Was this keen wit unable to defend himself? Was the most brilliant comedy-writer of the day unable to grasp the incongruity of his own position? Why was he at loss to oppose, unable to confess, a charge of indecency too easily proven upon the body of his works?

The seeming (and the usual) answer is that he perfectly understood the nature of his offence, and was ashamed to confess his guilt. But a careful reading of the *Amendments* leaves a strong impression that this is not the right one. If he had wished to conceal his iniquities he would have been more clever about it. He would not have puzzled Collier (and later critics) by denying that there was indecency where to us it is too apparent. He would have instituted such complete or partial defences as a critic of his acumen would have well known how to offer. He would not, like one of his own fools, have left his flanks unguarded while he stopped to vilify his opponent's literary style! But regard this attack from Congreve's point of view, and the dramatist's wild return begins to seem more comprehensible. Congreve, as we have seen, had endeavored to present his class's conception of gallant life. This attempt was not immoral. It had nothing to do with morality, except indirectly in the possible effect of a stage presentation. He had created the charming Angelica and Cynthia, Mellefont and Valentine; Mirabell and Millamant were forming in his brain. He had also, after the manner of his time, admitted too much of the licentiousness of the world from which these characters sprang. In this last he was morally culpable. Per-

haps he would have conceded it in some measure if he had been given the chance: he tacitly concedes it by the sweeter language and purer action of *The Way of the World*, which came after Collier's attack. But he was not given the chance. Collier made the true charge that these dramatists were presenting upon the stage, manners prejudicial to public morality; but he made it as subordinate to, as a part of, the untrue charge—untrue at least for Congreve—that their real purpose was to set lewdness and evil as an example for English life. “Thus we see,” he says, “what a fine time Lewd People have on the English Stage. No Censure, no mark of Infamy, no Mortification must touch them. They keep their Honour untarnish'd and carry off the Advantage of their Character. They are set up the Standard of Behaviour and the Masters of Ceremony, and Sense. And at last that the Example may work the better, they generally make them rich, and happy, and reward them with their own Desires.” All of these statements except the last are true, but the implication that the writers referred to were unprincipled counsellors of sin was, so far as Congreve is concerned, false. It was naturally this, the main charge, that Congreve tried to meet. He failed. With his Stuart point of view, his callousness to indecency, and his sympathy for the weaknesses of the gallant life, he was unable to meet it squarely, because he was unable to disentangle his innocence from his guilt. He tried to defend the defensible and the indefensible together, and the weak and irritable *Amendments* was the result. Even so a painter accused of immorality in his depiction of the nude might hesitate to admit an undue freedom of portrayal lest he should seem to be confessing that prurience was the *aim* of his work.

The confusion of mind which led to Congreve's failure in this controversy, to his manifest irritation, and to the

sulkiness which shows itself in later dramatic criticism, and which may have been one motive for his retirement from the stage, is almost entirely due to his romantic conception of gallantry and the vices and virtues which accompanied it. There is complete incompatibility between his tolerant, or humorous, or rose-colored conception of the gallant pleasures and weaknesses of society, and Collier's, which was that of a moralist without imagination. Both were partly wrong: Congreve in staging the evil in libertinism without consideration of its moral effect; Collier in attacking the dramatist because his plays were not composed for the purpose of inculcating laws of right-living. Neither could have comprehended the other, but Congreve suffered most, since he was rendered incapable of reply.

The great controversy was really a struggle between irreconcilable societies. Congreve was blind to the vices which the moralists reprobated, because he was a connoisseur in the rare and excellent refinements which he found, or imagined, in the Stuart world. Like Shakespeare, he was strictly unmoral in his writings; like Molière most brilliant when his characters were godless epicureans; and a fastidious worldliness, tempered by romance, mellowed by a subtle melancholy, and illumined by wit, was the atmosphere in which alone his spirit expanded. It was in this atmosphere that he carried the idealization of the libertine beyond coarseness into the admirable Mirabell and Millamant. But Collier, blind to these charms, saw far more truly the dangers of accompanying vice. And Collier prevailed. Libertinism, having passed the bounds of safety, began to go out of fashion. The works of Addison, Steele, Swift, even Pope, show that in the eyes of the generation which came to the front about 1700 the gay sins of the Cavaliers, if still peccadilloes, were no longer

merely romantic. The rake was beginning to be unpopular among some of the most influential of "the quality"; the times were preparing to enjoy a novelist's criticism of such a character in the Lovelace of *Clarissa Harlowe*.

Congreve yielded a little before this movement, for his *Way of the World*, which contains his noblest refinements upon libertinism, is more decent than his other plays. And then at thirty years of age he threw up his part and left the stage. Was it laziness? For we know he was lazy. Was he discouraged by the partial failure of *The Way of the World*? These explanations are not in themselves sufficient. Was it not also because his sensitive spirit felt the cold blast of a new, an uncomprehending criticism, and shrank? *The Way of the World* did not fail merely because libertinism was going out of fashion. Plays of Farquhar and Vanbrugh of far greater licentiousness succeeded at a later date. But Congreve was expecting misapprehension of some kind. "Little of it was prepared," he writes in the preface, "for that general taste which seems now to be predominant in the palates of our audience. . . . It is only by the countenance of . . . the few so qualify'd, that such who write with care and pains can hope to be distinguish'd." And in the prologue:

Satire he thinks, you ought not to expect;  
For so reformed a town, who dares correct?

So exquisite a master of the arts of literary refinement felt sooner and more keenly than his fellow dramatists the coming of the adverse wave which, threatening the gross, seemed to threaten the fine also. There were Colliers in his audiences who had no better name than bawdry for the life over which he had thrown some glamour of romance.

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